

# **PUBLIC HEALTH**

**ALWAYS WORKING FOR A SAFER AND  
HEALTHIER WASHINGTON**

## **COMMUNICATION TOOLS for Standards for Public Health in Washington**

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To help you talk about Washington's public health standards, and especially about the baseline evaluation, we've included a number of tools for you to use. These should be helpful whether you are talking to the media, the public or your local Board of Health. Feel free to use all or part of these messages, and to tailor them to fit your specific needs.

- **Fact Sheet: The Public Health Network in Washington State.** This is also an educational tool, and can be used internally, externally or on the Web. It is a general overview of public health in Washington. (1 page)
- **Fact Sheet: Washington State Standards for Public Health.** This is an educational tool, suitable for sharing internally and externally, or for posting on your Web site. It gives a basic understanding of Washington's public health standards. (2 pages, front and back) The backside has bulleted basics on the key findings and recommendations that are a result of the baseline evaluation.
- **Questions and Answers.** This is a **set of questions you're likely to be asked, and their answers.** You may want to personalize some of the information to suit your jurisdiction. This information about the standards and the process for the baseline evaluation can be shared. (2 pages)
- **Talking Points: Washington State Standards for Public Health.** These talking points can be used as quick "sound bites" when talking with your local elected officials, the media or the public. You may want to keep these next to your phone for quick reference. They are intended for internal use; however, the information is developed so that it won't be harmful if released. (1 page)
- **Letter to Board of Health Members or Commissioners.** This letter is provided to local public health administrators. It can be useful in presenting the Standards to your Board. It is not being sent directly to Board Members or Commissioners. (2 pages, front and back)

This communications packet also includes a couple of generic pieces about **developing key messages** and **working with the media**. These are great communications basics. You can use them for some ideas on how to create your own specific key messages. They may also be helpful to review before talking with your local media.

We are developing a set of PowerPoint slides to accompany this information, which should be available in January. You'll hear more about this after the first of the year.

If you would like this information sent to you on a CD or disk, please e-mail Kate Lynch ([kate.lynch@doh.wa.gov](mailto:kate.lynch@doh.wa.gov)) in the state Department of Health Communications Office. These tools are also posted on the Web: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/PHIP/default.htm>. If you have any questions about how to use the materials, call state Department of Health Communications Director Tim Church at (360) 236-4077. If you would like help handling a specific media request, call the Department of Health's Communications Office at (360) 236-4027.

**Washington State Public Health Partners**

Northwest Center for Public Health Practice, University of Washington  
Washington State Association of Local Public Health Officials  
Washington State Board of Health  
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## **FACT SHEET**

### **The public health network in Washington State**

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Public health agencies in Washington provide critical programs and services for all people in the state—from drinking water protection to disease prevention. The public health network coordinates at the local, statewide and national level to keep our communities healthy and safe.

#### **The work of public health includes:**

- **Essential programs for improving health:** Programs such as immunizations, communicable disease prevention, and chronic disease and injury prevention help individuals and communities stay healthy.
- **Information that works:** Resources such as educational and training programs, community health reports and statewide health and safety information provide individuals and communities information they can use to make good decisions.
- **Protecting you and your family every day:** Services such as drinking water and air quality monitoring, septic system inspections, restaurant inspections, disease prevention and planned community crisis response ensure individual and community health and safety.

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## **FACT SHEET**

### **Washington State Standards for Public Health**

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#### **Doing a good job**

How do we know we are doing a good job in public health? *The Public Health Standards for Washington* were developed to answer this question. They were developed by a collaboration of state and local public health workers, the State Board of Health and the University of Washington over five years, field tested in 1999, and published in 2000.

The standards cover the major areas of public health: communicable disease prevention, assessment of health issues, health promotion and prevention, environmental health, and access to health care using a list of critical health care issues. Within each topic area, the standards identify the work that meets the goal of “what every citizen has a right to expect” from their public health system.

#### **Measurable goals**

A goal for 2002 was to measure the ability of the public health system at the state and local levels to meet the standards. This baseline measurement study was conducted June through September, with results available in December. Thirty-eight areas of the Department of Health (DOH) and every local health jurisdiction (LHJ) were visited by MCPP Healthcare Consulting Inc., the firm that the Standards Committee recommended to conduct the study. Training sessions were held in May and June for DOH and LHJ staff to prepare for the study. The study identified areas of exemplary practices and areas where services or programs do not meet standards. The results help identify areas that need improvement and articulate achievements of the entire public health system.

#### **Self-assessment**

Before the site visit, each agency was asked to complete a self-assessment that lists standards and their measures, and to organize documentation supporting each measure. During the site visit the contractors looked at documentation for each standard to rate whether the documents demonstrated the standard was being met. Each agency that was visited will receive a report of their results. In addition the consultants have collected “best practice” documents that will be posted to the DOH Web site for agencies to use to help them meet the standards in the future.

The standards were written to identify a higher level of performance than what currently exists and it is expected that the public health agencies in this state will work towards meeting the standards in the years to come.

## **KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

# **Washington State Standards for Public Health**

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### **Evaluation process**

- All 34 local health jurisdictions were reviewed
- All local health jurisdictions were reviewed for 98 measures
- Local health jurisdictions were grouped in peer rankings for reporting analysis
  - Small town/rural – 11
  - Mixed rural – 5
  - Large town – 7
  - Urban – 11

### **Baseline evaluation findings**

- Strengths:
  - Public information
  - Community involvement
  - Public health assessment
  - Managing communicable disease issues
- Needs:
  - Environmental health education planning
  - Risk communication
  - Emergency response
  - Access to critical health services

### **What was learned?**

- There is a need to increase consistency across the system.
- There is a positive connection between size of budget and/or number of employees and performance on about 25 percent of the measures.
- In many cases, additional resources would be needed for a program or health department to meet the standards.
- The dilemma for most sites is that “doing” the work takes precedence over documenting the work. Standards and measures focus not only on doing the work but also on quality improvement steps: planning, implementation, and evaluation.

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## **Questions and Answers**

### **Washington State Standards for Public Health**

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#### **How will the Standards for Public Health be used?**

These standards are a public health management tool. They are for anyone in the governmental public health system to use. They articulate the role of each partner in the public health system. These standards will be used to assess the overall public health system. Over time, the standards will help identify needs to strengthen the public health system. The first public health standards survey was conducted in mid-2002.

#### **What will happen next?**

Reports will be generated in late 2002 and distributed to sites that participated in the baseline survey. These will include reports for individual sites and for the entire public health system. Each agency is responsible for distributing its report to use for organizational planning.

#### **How will the standards help individual agencies?**

The baseline measurement shows where public health is in 2002. It will help public health organizations in our state prioritize and plan for the future. Many programs do not currently have the resources needed to meet the public health standards. Where agencies cannot meet the standards, analysis will be initiated to explore the reasons why. Sometimes standards can be met by changing priorities. Other times, it would take more resources to meet a standard. This analysis will help focus efforts. The initial survey provides a baseline. Areas of improvement can be targeted based on what's learned from the first study.

#### **Who did the baseline survey?**

An independent firm, MCPP Healthcare Consulting Inc., conducted the baseline survey. The Standards Committee advised the consultants and reviewed the study tool and format for the reports. MCPP also conducted training sessions for local and state public health staff to prepare for the site visits.

#### **Why are these standards important?**

Public health is a broad, diverse field that relies on expertise from many different disciplines to protect the public. It's vital to our communities and quality of life, yet it's very hard to summarize and measure.

Five topic areas describe the purpose of public health: 1) Understanding health issues: standards for public health assessment, 2) Protecting people from disease: standards for communicable disease and other health risks, 3) Assuring a safe, healthy environment for people: standards for assuring a safe, healthy environment, 4) Prevention is best/promoting healthy living: standards for prevention and community health promotion, 5) Helping people get the services they need: standards for access to critical health services.

What gets measured gets done. The measures particularly focus on quality improvement and management practices. The periodic surveys will track improvements in public health and help public health professionals to be accountable to communities, policy makers, and their profession. Public health work is too important to ignore. It is difficult to fix problems without measuring performance of standards.

**How do these compare with program standards?**

The Standards for Public Health focus on the overall system, which includes local and state health departments, along with universities and the State Board of Health. In some cases, it includes other partners that deliver services locally, or state agencies that deliver or pay for services.

Program standards remain very important. Both program standards and system standards are needed. The public health system is a network of professionals with expertise, a combination of specific programs, a range of laws and ordinances, and a set of values that protect and improve the health of people. It is bigger than any one program, and a systematic look at public health can help point out where future efforts are needed.

**Are these final?**

Yes and no. These are the standards used for the baseline measurement. Certainly what was learned through this survey will be applied to make changes to the standards. Some standards will be added, deleted, or changed accordingly.

**You may use the following space for information about your health department.**

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## **TALKING POINTS**

### **Washington State Standards for Public Health**

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- The public health system in our state helps protect you and your family every day. These standards are helping us find the gaps and address them so we can get better at what we do.
- Our public health system is made up of local, state and federal agencies. Together, this network provides essential services for improving health in Washington state.
- These standards help us take a critical look at public health performance to identify where we are now and what we need to do to improve.
- The standards are designed to measure current practices, discover gaps, and help us find a way to improve public health in our state.
- The standards survey has resulted in a library of “exemplary practices.” This information – successes around public health standards work – will be shared online, allowing health agencies in our state to learn from the good work of others. This resource will allow us to save time and effort, while improving the system.
- The standards baseline measurement was taken over the past six months. We know some improvements are already being made. During the survey process, some agencies and programs found gaps they were able to address right away and make their systems stronger.
- The standards survey has given public health agencies in Washington a way to step back from everyday work, and look at the bigger picture. We are using what we learn to identify areas that need work, set priorities and improve the quality of public health in our state.
- These analyses of the initial results are just beginning. This is a snapshot of public health at the time the survey was taken. We plan to measure public health on a regular basis to make sure we are moving in the right direction and making progress.

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STATE OF WASHINGTON

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

*1112 SE Quince Street • PO Box 47890  
Olympia, Washington 98504-7890  
Tel: (360) 236-4010 • FAX: (360) 586-7424  
TDD Relay Service: 1-800-833-6388*

November 21, 2002

Dear Commissioner or Board of Health member:

Washington State is a national leader in public health. One reason for this is the close and continuing partnership between the state Department of Health and our state's 34 local public health jurisdictions. Our work to establish performance standards for public health is one example of how we have combined efforts to improve our ability to protect the health of the people of Washington State.

You may have seen this work, summarized in a booklet, *Standards for Public Health in Washington State*. If not, your local health director will have a copy and can tell you more about this work. In July 2002, we received a national award for this work from the National Association of City and County Health Officials and the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials.

The 1993 Health Services Act called for us to set standards for public health; this was reinforced in 1995 legislation and, in both cases, was linked to additional funding for public health. Our approach has been to develop standards in a state-local partnership, because that is how the public health system in our state operates every day.

We recently finished a major step in the process of adopting and using performance measurement. A baseline study was conducted, measuring our ability to meet the standards we had jointly developed. This step was taken following a multi-year process of development, revision, and field-testing. The baseline study was carried out by independent consultants and included every local health jurisdiction, plus 38 program offices within the Washington State Department of Health.

We are currently distributing the findings of the baseline study to local health jurisdictions and state programs. As expected, we found areas of strength and areas where we can make improvements. Many of the Standards are considered "stretch" standards – describing performance at a level that is desirable, but would require time and resources to achieve. Some of the Standards can be met more easily, with focused effort or increased partnerships. We view these results as a "baseline" – a picture of where we are today. This is not a test to pass or fail, but a framework for shaping our future. Over the months ahead, we will be using the baseline study findings to look at how we can improve our performance as a state-local government system.

This is a critical time for the public health system. We are working hard to improve preparedness so that every community has strong public health protection. We encourage you to support your local health department or district in efforts they make to use the *Standards for Public Health in Washington*.  
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary Selecky".

Mary Selecky, Secretary  
Washington State Department of Health

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jean Baldwin".

Jean Baldwin, President  
Washington State Association of Local Public Health Officials

## Key Messages

### What are key messages?

- They are positive statements about your agency and your work.
- Key messages are the most important things that you want a reporter to know about an issue.
- Key messages can be factual, describe a position, relate to policy, specific to an issue, or be a caring statement.
- They answer the question, “what do we want the public to know about this issue/story/controversy?”
- They are the quotes that you wish reporters included in their stories, but seldom do.
- They are guides to help you get across what you want to say, even if the reporter doesn’t ask the “perfect question.” Include key messages whenever possible in answer to a question.

### What are the characteristics of a good key message?

**Important.** Key messages must be important. Don’t pick trivial topics.

**Single thought.** A good key message communicates a single idea.

**Succinct.** The simpler and shorter your key message is, the better.

**Conversational.** Write key messages like people talk. Use contractions. Avoid acronyms and bureaucratic language.

**Consistent.** Key messages should always be consistent with agency and division goals.

## Working With Reporters: Tips

### What are reporters looking for?

- **News** is what is new today.
- **News** is easy to understand: Good vs. bad...right vs. wrong...safe vs. unsafe...David vs. Goliath...open vs. secret.
- **News** is a business: conflict, criticism and controversy sell.
- **What is news?** We don't get to decide. The media gets to decide.

### Tips...

- **Return calls promptly.** Reporters work on deadlines. Try to accommodate deadlines.
- **Be prepared.** Know the subject, angle, and deadline. Buy time. Are you the best person to respond? Check your facts. Set limits. Practice.
- **Stay with your message.** Plan your points and make them whenever possible. Never go into an interview just to answer reporter questions: it's an opportunity to deliver your messages.
- **Be positive.** Good themes for messages: what you do (or did), why it's important, what it will accomplish, what it has already accomplished, and the need for action.
- **Always tell the truth.**
- **Keep it short and simple.** Boil your ideas down. The typical quote is eight seconds.
- **Answer the questions you know.** It's OK to say you don't know. Find the answer or the right person and provide the info. Never speculate. Never speak for other people or groups.
- **Relate your answers to people.** What does this mean to people? Why should people care? Show compassion and concern for safety. Avoid "bureaucratese" and technical talk.
- **Start with your conclusion.** Then offer one or two points of explanation or support.
- **Be appreciative.** Thank the reporter for the chance to discuss the issue. This is a good way to build a good working relationship.
- **Don't let them do "a story about you, without you."** Often, a news story about a public health issue is going to run with or without us. **GET YOUR MESSAGES IN!**

## Working With Reporters

### Avoiding problems:

- **Never go “off the record.”**
- **Your personal opinion.** Get the subject back on track..
- **Don’t speculate.** It is risky to allow a reporter to convince you to fill in the blanks in a “what if?” scenario. Speculation can *become* the story. Talk about what you know, not ‘what if?’
- **Keep your cool.** Don’t argue with reporters. Keep repeating your key messages and correcting erroneous statements. Take a break if you need to.
- **Commenting on information you aren’t familiar with.** Get the facts first.
- **Characterizing what you said with a stronger slant.** Stick with your own position. Don’t just agree when a reporter recasts what you say into different words unless it’s still accurate.
- **Manipulating you into talking.** Reporter says if you can’t answer, he’ll have to go with someone else’s side of the story. Honestly explain why you can’t talk now, but keep the door open for a future story.
- **The pregnant pause.** Don’t fill the void. Stop when you’ve said what you want to say.
- **Blaming others.** No thanks.
- **I like you! Let’s talk!** Interviews are not conversations--they’re business. Be a well, not a fountain. Stick to your game plan (your key messages).